

THE

*Rat Collection*

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# THE RAT COLLECTION: HOUSE WITH RATS Áine James Macargee

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With lots of love to  
Oscar, my best friend.

## Chapter One

“Do you remember the wallpaper which hung in mother’s house? It was the green one at the top of the stairs with all of its unfurled leaves that laid set with odious dyes; the ugly way it stretched the length of the hall and overwhelmed the whole of the room with its pervasive pattern. It could only have been looked upon through strained eyes already tired of its distaste from a glance. When you ran through the hall that one year, - no more than eight you must have been - and you tripped with a pair of shears, I feared that she was going to kill you where you laid hugging at your bleeding knee. The wallpaper had only sustained the most miniscule scrape but her heart would have broken the same if you had taken those shears and tore it apart strip by strip and left only the remnanting tacks behind it. The scratch was unnoticed to our untrained

eyes, and even in my older years I could search between every flicking curl of leaf and every intertwined stem stained upon the paper and there would not be any significant instance of scratches, rips, or blemishes to be found.

“ ‘Disgusting!’ She would yell, ‘We live like pigs, my house is filthy!’ And we looked at each other with the same bewildered expression, our agreement was the only brief respite from what could be thought if the house truly were as dirty as she believed it to be. It was a nice house, no matter how she tried to force this belief onto us; it was kept without clutter permeating upon any surface and no dust was ever allowed to pile in any smallest corner or within any finest chiseled ornamentation. She lived with her mops and rags on a tight schedule as long as she was able, and she only forced herself to work harder when she could not perform to this standard. It was all this labor on bent knees and scrubbing until blistered knuckles oozed blood between soap that made her the state she is in today; and it did not matter then how much she scrubbed.

“It was after six good years of employment and money saved, I had no need but the thread upon my needle and a good patterned fabric to fix into a quilt. I governed a small child and taught them well but they outgrew my teachings and I had nowhere to go but mother’s home

while I waited for new employ. I regret to having left her for she lived alone since your departure to France and I onto an unfamiliar estate. Is she sad? I had to wonder all the while on my carriage ride. I recalled a story as it was told by a sailor, and while it may have been fictitious, mused well in this time spent alone.

“It was aboard one of the four ships led by Commodore Matthew Perry for Japan. A sailor claimed that the Japanese people, after two hundred years of isolation, were so strict in their laws as to line their beaches with mats leading up to a guest house. They allowed no more than a few American men to depart from the ships and neither breath nor hair was permitted reach beyond the lengths of woven straw. The Americans stayed only a short while; none could know what truly occurred in the little time spent, but they bade farewell and left with no souvenirs but a signed document and satisfaction of this meeting. When the very last of the ships turned around, before they began to clear off the horizon, all of the mats and the guest house were burned. The smoke rising from their small island was thick and consuming; the destruction and black in their lungs was more palpable than a stranger. Mother, in her time alone, could have been a more dedicated isolationist than our Japanese neighbors if she wished it to be so; and I, despite being born in that house, departed, and was thus returning as a

foreigner. I ventured to her shores without any ship or crew equipped with guns and canons, I was just my own fragile self, and the punishment for entering as a foreigner is death.

“If I were a prettier lady, more agreeable yet heavily dipped by my melancholy until it made me to be a gothic heroine fit for a novel, I could have already been wed to a wealthy man and spent my days wandering the neat hedges of our estate and with every need met. But I am afraid I am quite plain, an aspect of my being that mother had taught me when I was too young to know what it truly meant, and I could have only thought of all that she told me through my life and how it still lingers - like the smoke laid over Japan - as I stood upon her doorstep. The door always sat flush into the brickwork, as if lacking hinges and was never made with the intention to be opened; but rather, to make believe that a door exists, because in the perfect center of a perfectly symmetrical home is where a door ought to go. I dreaded the silence between my knocks and dreaded more when the door at last broke apart from its permanent fixture and forced me to see what I feared to see.

“ ‘Why, if it isn’t my little Lenora,’ mother welcomed me in a voice so sweet, and I thought then, for only a brief moment, that all my grief was the over exaggerated pangs of a child seeking independence from

their kin. She smiled but I thought her lips to be a devilish curl made in poor imitation of what a mother could look like when they are happy to see their child. I knew right away, after only a small step onto the neatly lined floors, that jagged devil horns are fixed too deeply into her skin and are too thick to be chiseled away or shed.

“ ‘You left me all alone in this house, what have I ever done to you?’ she asked, voice still sweet, but did not allow me time to answer, ‘Was I so terrible a mother, I, who provided for you and your brother. I don’t see the either of you anymore. Where have my children gone?’

“The words punctured me; I was coiled by steel wires and a cruel torturer was on the end of it tightening a wheel that compressed my bones into splinters. I am disgraced. As a daughter and as a person, I am miserable; it is all I have ever known and it is all that I ever will be. I apologized but she did not hear. I promised to write to her more, to visit if she ever so wishes, and at last when she spoke to me again there were no words to fall from her thin, wicked lips that would have made me feel worthy of living.

“We ate supper. I wished it would have been quieter than it was; each little clinking of the dishes and each scrape of the knife missing the cold, stringy beef was a terrible screech that trembled in my ears. I could hear her chew and she could hear mine just as well, every peckish



swallow went down my parched throat with the threat of getting stuck and my mind banged as I anticipated her to yell at me for how ill-mannered I am eating. But she said nothing. I washed the dishes when we finished. She sat with hands folded in her lap, there was no sound and no movement from her as I lifted away her plate and took it to be cleaned. The plates were immediately dried and placed back on the shelf in an orderly stack, the cups were set back into their recess in the assigned rows; and the utensils returned to the divided drawer with place for every unique fork, spoon, and knife in the set. The cabinetry was shut slowly and quietly as to prevent any slamming. When I at last finished, a dry rag was used to wipe the basin clean. It was as if it had never been used at all.

“ ‘And would you please help me tomorrow with washing the curtains? They’re disgusting. You should see those nasty things, I ought to just throw them all out.’

“ ‘Yes, mother.’ was the reply. I went to bed early but failed to sleep. The room I grew up in was stripped of all familiarity that I might have remembered. The vanity I cried into was covered with cloth, and the bed was decorated with cold and uninviting linen. I recognized a smell to be the only sensation excepting my own misery that brought me back to when I was a child. It stung harshly in my nose. No matter how I itched

or at last held cloth over my face, the smell was sutured to the very whole of my chamber; the source of it, I realized at last to be the green wallpaper just beyond the door. But it was not alone responsible for this misery of mine: it was the parlor set neatly as a picture, the candles that have never been lit, and the chairs that cannot be seated. The piano that has never known a note of music and windows that do not let in light. It's the floorboards set in even rows along the full length of the house, doorways set perfectly flushed into unblemished walls, the rugs kept orderly and without dirt or untucked frays of fiber. Every wall is straight. All of the fabrics are pressed and creased. The decor is without paintings or portraits. I thought that maybe I smelled nothing at all; this distinctive scent that I had always known so well was pervading my sinus and resumed a familiar shape that forced itself upon me; it was because there was nothing else. Between every tight stitch and each bare surface of the shelves, I thought again what I always thought: It disgusts me."

## Chapter Two

Lenora sits in her seat, held tight in a blanket and shivering despite the warmth of cloth and fire. Her luggage, consisting only of two small bags and one large case, was beside her feet, occasionally kicking at their sides. She came with nothing else for she owned nothing more; the whole of her life exists within these little clasps of leather.

“Might I offer you tea, or perhaps a brandy will ease you.” asked the brother. He was declined but still went to the bookshelf where a sizable stash of liquors shared home with the unread literary. All of the bottles are new and lacking a fine ferment. Likewise, it was within a cluttered shelf lacking taste in any of the titles and with dust gathered atop of the bindings and lingering deeper still in thick piles where the candles do not shine light; all meeting together in a dull parlor unfit for hosting. He

did not mind this humility, for he is a disgraced man without wife and his minimal staff of servants are underpaid in their labors.

“She was a sickly woman, I had always known, but I wish I could have been with her sooner. Even now, still then; I hated her. I despised her. I curse her alone for my misery and all my grief and yet I wish that this hatred was not so deeply knotted in my heart; I wish I could have loved her, or she loved me. If there would have been any instance of love, to any such capacity as a smile unobstructed by an odious presence which cast shadow over our relation; had there been anything at all to justify my existence, I would have had an excuse to say that I loved her.

“We cleaned the next morning, and the dirt - little that there was - barely made thin film to coat any surface. I wore my wrapper without corset, for the day was spent on bent knees and sweating until I was reduced to unbuttoning and resuming exposed in my linens. Each surface was wiped clean but it was not enough. We took down the curtains and washed them well; the stair railing was polished and the wooden trims all dusted. Each rug was beaten, every pillow fluffed, the fabrics were taken out to wash and left to hang and then folded away in straight creases. All the while she barked at me, demanding that I perform exactly to her precise instructions. Her voice was spoken in growls that ruptured within my ears at each mistake - and there were

many. The only fault was my own. In this instance I speak, she told me: pick it up. A simple instruction, but why was I so lost? I lifted the rag from the floor. Pick it up, right beside you. I looked around but saw nothing. What does she mean? I am following her instruction but something is wrong. To your left! The right! To the left, it did not appear; to the right, there was no significance. I must be looking directly at it, so why am I unable to understand? What am I searching for? Where could it be? If it is not the rag which already sits in my hand with water dripping onto the floor, then what?

“ ‘You fool, you complete dullard, it’s in front of you!’ I was still. I looked. And at last I saw but her voice was already strained from the yelling. It was a piece of lint too small for even a bird to stuff in their nest. I picked it frantically as if feigning excitement could mend the tension but I had lost balance in this attempt. I stumbled. My head was hit on the wall.

“I had forgotten the most important rule in my absence: the only thing ever allowed to touch her walls, as sacred and holy as marble carving, was the green wallpaper. I apologized but she did not hear; her own voice surpassed mine in volume and in strength.

“She stood over me and I was so small as to fit within the gnarl of her fist. My body shivered. Fear bloomed. The heart in my chest weighed

me down so I could not move from my injure. She said nothing; she did not blink. Her eyes were set on me, a wrinkled face lacking life but was masked into an unmoving scowl that bore teeth in the slit of dried lips. And somehow yet, I found myself to had slipped away; I must have crawled. I escaped in fear that she would grab at me and do as she had done many times before. I could not hear beyond the roaring within my brain and I could not see as my eyes were heavy with tears. My body trembled on each step, crazed but not yet a complete shatter, until at last I set my bedroom door back into its flush and I collapsed with back against it. My heart hurt. The walls cushion me in their flat, unchanging smoothness. I stared at them always; getting lost in the cracks that stretch through the entirety of the plaster. The hallway has cracks, - as does the entryway, the dining, and the parlor where none were allowed to sit - but they cannot be seen as they too are covered by their own wallpapers. It was only my room, so small and so tight, that was bare. And I am comforted, if only for a brief respite, in the emptiness that is my own. I would have stayed there forever if a terrible screech had not called at me from behind the door; it pierced my ears in a long slash and my throat halted for fear to breathe.

“‘Get back out here!’ it said. I obeyed, for I felt that I had no choice.

“‘Look at this mess. Look what you have done.’

“The bucket had spilled. I did not knock it over, that much I thought that I had known; of the complete structure of my body, there was not skin or nail or the smallest stray fibers of my own garment that could have made contact with the bucket and made it fall such as it did, but still, I thought, ‘what have I done?’ and I begged forgiveness for my mistake. I stumbled to the puddle with shaken knees and cleaned it up as to satisfy her demands and to lessen her anger. But I did not do it right - just as I have never done anything else right in my life - and she took me by the roots of my hair and held me to her fangs. She hissed sour curls of breaths upon me.

“ ‘I have to do everything myself. Get out! Get out of my way!’ and she threw me, head banging on the wallpaper and I wished to die then; the sacred rule, again broken, was another purge of damnation sending me deeper to the depths of hell that I am so deserving of; I touched the wallpaper. She said nothing but gave a stare; she breathed heavily as a bull. I touched the wallpaper. I know because my head thumps; in the back and at the side and where my braids loosened from their pins - it is where I alone was responsible for touching the wallpaper. Mother’s hand made a movement. I fled. Her eyes stalked me. I did not look behind. She’s following me. She’s coming to get me because I touched her wallpaper. She’s behind me. Claws are nearing; sharpened teeth will

cradle me and clench me between the jaws. She will kill me. I closed the door. For a brief moment, I saw the hall and the mess I had made and the green wallpaper I had touched, and I saw mother splashing dirty water along the floor ineffectively. The door was locked and I waited. She is going to yell again. She will scream and bang at the hinges but I will not allow her to enter nor I to leave by her will.

“My bags were never unpacked fully, I only had to wait for opportunity to rid myself. Either she breaks the door and I retreat from the second story window - I thought of the fall and how it would torture my legs into splinters and I welcomed it then - or I could wait until the very late hours of the night when I know she is asleep and sneak out. I didn't know yet where desperation would lead me, so I waited. She yelled but I did not respond. I cared more to listen for her footsteps and if they neared. Her anger rose and fell; her voice was sweetened by honey and asked for my company, and sometimes it was quiet and it was this silence that I feared the most; for the air was lack of her rummaging through the house beyond the door and I could not anticipate what she could have done next. I sat still. Until my eyes were sore from the crying and legs stiff into their joints. I was hungry but I dared not to give attention to the pangs it brought upon me, for it had been years since I felt this way, and I knew that this emptiness would



pass. I could taste yesterday's beef lodged between the backmost set of my teeth, the gravy came back up in harsh bile. Night came with an unsteady silence. The stars refused to shine beyond the clouds and the crickets chirped out of tune with the frogs. I did not open the door immediately, though I had many opportunities for escape as night settled itself. My hand was on the knob but it refused to move. The house was digesting me slowly; I would have become another stained ornamentation upon the wallpaper if I did not leave. I opened the door with stilted hesitation. It creaked. I could not bring myself to open it any wider than the width of my foot. In the first instance of the hallway, I saw only dank and tight cavernous walls that surrounded the whole of the home with its darkness, I looked around and saw that mother was in the corner; or she was waiting on the stairs; or she could have been doing the same as I, peeking out from her own door and waiting. I closed the door and waited a few moments longer in this misery. Not yet.

"There were rats; there always has been, because it was an old house set in a tall grass field; even with her attentive eye, she did not notice so long as they left no trace. I could always hear them. In the basement and in the attic; through the halls and in my own bedroom I could hear all

their little scurrying feet and I would, if there was enough to share, invite them to a spread of hard biscuit crumbs from the tin I had kept in secret. I wish I could have had just one more biscuit, though I knew it would be stale; they always were, but dipped in water and without supper I thought of it as a feast, and the rats did not bother me then. I heard them on this night but lacked any light to see. The hall was set its own lone; the only presence was the odious paper fermenting on the walls, the rats, and I.

“I slipped quietly through before I realized how scared I truly was, and I hesitated down each step of the stairs for fear that any of the boards would creak and awaken the beast. From the top I wished to have to misstep, landing on my neck and the last sound I could ever hear in these halls is my own splitting bone. But I made it to the very bottom, and could hear below, beyond the stairs and further into the cellar, the rats scurrying and squeaking but more numerous than I ever remembered them to be. I made retreat; shutting the door to the house and meeting at last with the outside air that was so thin and smooth and lacking of any warmth. I walked the path into town, safety was found in watching the night as it became day, and I had thought myself to be a horrible person. My stomach was hurt from the hunger and my body was shivered, shoulders were heavy from carrying bags but I did not

allow myself to mind as I could always remember when I felt worse.

“I visited her between positions and what she said to me in my short visitations only made me move a further distance away. She never favored any persons who ventured to make up her company and disliked still the taste of her own soured brew. That is what you have thought too, isn't it? Why you moved beyond the country, speaking as a Frenchman and forgetting all of our childhood spent in the moors? You left for boarding school so young, so you never knew the extent of her person. She was an awful woman, but she did not deserve to be alone.” Lenore resumed, then gave air to allow for any response but there was none to be given. The brother drank his liquor from the neck as it was his usual habit and he gave a look that seemed to say I am tired, hurry up. So, she continued.

“It is engraved in the very foundations of my mind that I alone am at fault for not playing nurse to a sickly woman that scorned at my every faults and at my every sense of self until all I knew was that I was undeserving of the life she has given me. You were never bullied so much by her, it is because you grew up faster and larger than she could control and her house was not your home. I never slept as a child, I laid awake crying with pains and bruises as my only company; and that is why I never grew taller than the hem of my skirt. I was a small little doll

she could rip the hairs out of and tear the dresses, and it would cry and complain but never defend itself. She wanted her house to be a tidy little thing, and it was I who both stood in the way of it and helped her to achieve it. I moved further away, swearing this time to never be in her company again. On the carriage ride to my new employ, I wept and sobbed into my handkerchief until the driver stopped in the middle of the path.

“ ‘Sounded like a heaving dog’ he told me. I felt like a heaving dog begging to be put out of its misery with a musket set between its unknowing eyes. And yet, at that time, I thought that I loved her still. I could not hate her though she grieved me into brainfever from the very brief interactions with her. All the rest of the carriage ride was spent in my own sick. I thought of jumping off the bridge we crossed on our way to the estate. But, just alike all the other times I had thought while bridges crossed, it passed and vanished behind until the new miserable sensation took its place. This time, my mind caught attention to a tree with a strong protruding branch and my mind made suggestion at the ropes keeping my luggage secured on the roof. But, that too, passed. I arrived with no complications on the journey and was then a governess for a new child, and I looked at them how I wished mother would have looked upon me. There were times I was frustrated; the child was

mischievous or uncaring in our lessons, and I would raise my open palm - just as our mother had done to us - and I would lower it again when I saw their innocent eyes swelling and I would collapse onto their small frame, forcing myself to hold back hot tears. But my mercy did not make difference in their upbringing; for the master had already made habit of striking the child.

“I do not forgive our mother, but I am convinced enough that she should not have been left alone. I will tell you now what she did upon my second arrival. We wrote to each other more often than before, but it accomplished nothing. Each swirl of alphabet was a terrible stain soaking deep into the paper’s teeth, the ink unsmoothly setting and the tip of my pen scraping at the pulp. I never read her letters and she never read mine; the neither of us made effort beyond folding it and sealing with wax and this I was certain. I was still in my employ when I visited her this time, the family left and was not expected back for a month, I was without work. I have to think now that there may not be any work for me to return to, as I abandoned my duty completely and without notice to come to France. It has been rehearsed in my mind a thousand times to tell you what has become of mother, and a thousand times more I am still without words that tell a complete story that airs all of its morbidity. On the ride up to her house, it was hard to breathe. The air

was thick; humidity seeped from every crevice of the carriage and laid sluggish wetness that weighed everything down. The window was open but there was no breeze. I stifled on my own acids that came up from the back of my throat and there was no drink for to wash the sourness off from my tongue. At last we arrived and the cool outside air came onto me but did not puncture beyond my fabrics as I needed it to do. The house was larger than its scenery, and I took a moment to think if the image of it in my mind was from childhood - when everything cast shadows on us because we were so little - or if the image is recent and still its largeness is stifling. I felt small but not overcome with fear because I had convinced myself of some truths: the neatly lined bricks will not topple down on me, the first step upon the porch will not collapse from under my feet, and the door I knocked upon will not open to show a mouthful of teeth that will consume me whole and cradle me in its fangs.

“I waited. Each second passing was a pendulum swinging between the lingering, anticipative dread, and a sudden violent impulse to flee. It wasn't heard, I thought, so I should run. But what if it was, I should be brave, as an adult five years wiser than I had been before, meeting with an adult five years older for better or for worse. I knocked again and it

was for the second time that I was met with silence. A new twist of dread kinked on my ever lengthening rope; it yanked on my neck and gave a new sensation that I had not thought before. I banged on the door this time. My knuckles bore the bruises. I knocked and pulled at the knob that would not give way until it at last fell apart. The broken knob was in my hands, but the door was able to be slopped open and it made a rippling noise as it did so; and the very back of the door, where the wood had always sat within the house, was flocked by a fuzzy, odious substance while the frame was dangling stringy roots now torn from their soils. The thoughts which punctured my mind were fully realized, and I knew what I felt then was fear. Mother was in that house, in whole or in part, in life or in death, and the stench overwhelmed the whole of my being into retreat. It lingered of inhuman piss, some vile creature's excrements and unknowing of its own filth. I entered with a handkerchief held to my nose but it did little as the stink had already seeped into my nostrils and I could taste the sour air with each breath I hesitated to breathe. Mother must surely be dead, I thought. All the rats with all their fleas and disease would have already plucked out her hair to make nesting and within the hollowed skull is where they lay to birth pups. I gagged. I had to leave. I should have taken some wood to kindle a fire, light it with a match and let it burn from the inside of this wretched

building.

“ ‘Lenora, dear, is it you?’ came from a bedroom. It was familiar, but not welcoming; it lacked warmth and was captured in a puddle of phlegm. Each syllable was the dreading scrape of nails against glass; the conclusion settled itself in my heart and could have shattered it then. She should burn. None will know. Burn all of the rot and decay. This building without bones to keep it up in a wind; with mother inside, she will burn in her own filth and it will boil onto her skin.

“ ‘Lenora,’ the voice spoke again. It was weak and sorry. And I followed it. Up the stairs; creaking on every step and dodging the boards which eroded up from their nails, meeting with the wallpaper and I did not mind it then. It was chewed and spit out, the rats were dead with teeth still hinged onto the paper. But they still gnawed at it until the strips grew heavy with wetness. The wall behind it, which I had only seen this once, was nothing more than cracked plasters with holes dug deep where the rats had bred in their secrecy. I opened mother’s door.

“Terrible clawing hurried all around. The ceiling cracked above her; small splinters of wooden debris and chips of old paint dusted her wrinkled face. She laid in a bed of bones and crusts; her body indistinguishable from the filth. She licked a swollen tongue slowly around her lips, picking up the paint and rat excrement that covered her



completely. She strained to move beyond the flicking of her tongue; I ushered towards her with my handkerchief buried so deeply within my nostrils that blood began to stain it. Into her eyes, I saw that they had become faded at the pupils and crusty in the wrinkled folds, with infection curdling. She should have been left to rot in her stench.”

Lenora at last finished her tale. She looked at her brother, who for the duration had remained silent and inattentive; the recollection was unwanted, unstimulating chatter. He never cared for mother, never knew her well, and this visit was an inconvenience.

“Mother is not yet dead but she will be soon. If you would like to say farewell, please do so before morning. Can you, dear brother, at least give her this closure?”

“She was a miserable woman.” was the reply.

“And may I retire to bed now?” He might have asked, tired of the evening and with the very last sip of his drink; the remnanting droplets collected from swirling the bottle, but Lenora pulled her largest case closer to her and struggled to maneuver its weight. She undid the latches, they made a heavy din that echoed through, and when she pulled back the fabric, she said then, but not to her brother:

“How are you fairing?” revealing the inside of the case to be the bed of a most miserable woman. Dehydrated body, naked and bound into

the shape of the container; wrinkles folded over in paper-thin creases that are so pale as to expose every structure of bone and veins. Its mouth is sewed shut by tightly knotted threads and crusty eyes flooded by their own bloodshot; these eyes blinked.



END